

Lobbying Tips

by Peter Newbould

American Psychological Association Practice Organization

Here are some broad guidelines for Hill lobbying, drawn on the Practice Federal Advocacy Handbook. There's no completely right way to lobby or completely wrong way. Everybody has a different technique, and what you need to do is consider the advice of the people who've done it before and dive in yourself. You'll find this is not particularly hard, this is not rocket science, and it builds on the strengths you have as a professional who understands people and motivation.

Limit your focus when you advocate on behalf of mental health. You want to go in to talk with the health staffer or with the member about psychology issues that are currently important to us as a profession. Stick to your handout material. Don't stray in the discussion by going into unrelated things like foreign relations or tax issues that have nothing to do with mental health. And don't err in getting into a discussion of the weather back home. This may eat up the precious minutes that you have.

Form your message concisely. In your handout material that our staff has prepared, there is a bold faced message for each of the issues. What you want to be able to do is summarize your issue in a soundbite. That's a media term, as you know, but it literally means that if you have only 15 seconds to talk to a member, get the essence of your visit out right away concisely before his or her attention span wanders. That's why we give you a nifty laminated palmcard with the message on it.

So after you've gone in and established who you are, get down to it. Say, "*Senator, I want to talk to you about the need to extend the restoration of outpatient mental health Medicare reimbursement that was cut by CMS 5-Year Review.*" That's 10 seconds. Get out the soundbite then fill in with the details following the major points.

You literally may have only 60 seconds to get your point out. Many of you have gone to a meeting where it was scheduled, it looked good, you get in there on time, and suddenly the legislative bells ring, the member jumps up and runs out the door! You can try for a "walk & talk," where, rather than being abandoned, you quickly say to the member, "Can we walk with you?" He'd be rude to say no. Get yourself together, leave your coats there and just go. Walk with the member to the hall, go down the member's elevator, and be talking to the member to get those points out. The more time you have the more you can explain your views and probe for the member's position.

You may also have a situation where you're talking with the staffer and the member does a drop-in. You have a designated 20 minutes with the health LA, and that may or may not have been expected, and all of a sudden the member blows through. There are four meetings going on in the office at the same time. The member says, "just wanted to say hi." Don't talk about the weather, don't talk about how Aunt Sadie from home says hi, get your message out. Use your soundbite clearly so that at the end of the day the Congressman or Senator is going to call the LA in and say, "Those psychologists were saying something about parity... tell me what they wanted." You want to get the member's attention so that he or she will revisit the issue and seriously consider the material you're leaving and the requests that you're making for cosponsorship.

Know the member's prior record. If you're going in to ask for cosponsorship of a bill, it would be helpful and would guide your presentation to know if the member has already cosponsored the bill or its predecessor in the prior Congress. That's why we give each state's federal advocacy coordinator a list of health bills that your state's members have cosponsored. Talk to your FAC before your Wednesday meetings so you can coordinate your message for each visit. If a member helped us in the past the first thing you can say is, "Thank

you, Congressman, we really appreciate your help on that parity bill last year. The problem is still around and we'd like to get your cosponsorship of the new bill."

Recognize as well that the verb is very important. Cosponsorship. That's what you're asking for. If you are trying to gather support for a bill, say "cosponsorship" not "support." Members and staff can be kind of tricky. If you just say, "I want you to support the bill" they may not cosponsor it, which would put the position on the public record. They may tell you, "Yeah, I support that bill" and then they may never do anything about it.

Sign the guest book and leave your business card. When you get into the office sign the guest book because you're constituents and you want them to know who you are and where you're from. When the meeting begins or ends, leave your business card so they can keep track of you to follow up. You want to build a relationship; something that is more than a one day affair. You want to be able to have a solid working relationship with the member and the staff. The ultimate in that being, someday they're going to call you and say, "We've been asked to cosponsor Senator X's new bill and I think you may be interested in it and here's what it's about. Should we cosponsor it? Wow. All of a sudden you're being consulted because you're established a relationship; you've impressed them with your credibility and knowledge and they're reaching out to you. That is an ideal.

When I started working for Congressman Jim Florio as a legislative assistant doing health care issues I remember very well the annual visit by the retail druggists, the pharmacists. I would be visited by Lou Mitchell of Swedesboro, New Jersey who ran a corner drug store there, a mom and pop operation and he was very well prepared. Not only was he well prepared he was able to follow up with information that I found was very good. So instead of calling the lobbyist for their association I would call him. It would impress him that I was interested, but he was able to help me. I would call him up and say, "Lou, we just got a letter about a bill and I think maybe Florio ought to cosponsor, what do you think?" He says, "Yeah, we were just about to send you a couple hundred letters on that." I was able to head off a couple hundred pieces of mail and save trees in the process.

State your points clearly and firmly but don't argue. It's going to be very rare than a staffer will argue with you. If that's what those of you who are rookies at doing this are worried about -- that you don't know the issues well enough, that someone will give you a hard time -- don't get in a posture where you're pressing the staff or member into being very defensive. You're introducing them to the information, you're asking them for help, you don't want them to have the impression of an unpleasant visit. Like they say, "Those psychologists...that was the worst meeting I had all week... next time they call for a visit say we're too busy." That's of course what you don't want to have happen.

Tell an anecdote that illustrates your point. You have a lot of rhetoric and issue arguments in your Hill dropoff packets; some of it, though, can be pretty dry. What you want to be able to do is relate how the issue you're talking about impacts the constituents back home. Personalize the issue or the data. Elected officials are going to remember a compelling example of how a patient you treated was helped. Your story can illustrate medical cost offset, or the perils of tourniquet gatekeeping.

Ask for specific action and follow up. If you have a bill that you're working on, know the bill number or at least the sponsor because that helps identify it. Like last Congress when we said, "*Senator, we want you to cosponsor the Domenici/Kennedy bill for mental health parity.*" When I say follow up, very often, probably more often, you're not going to get an immediate answer, they want to consider it. They want to look over your material, they want to do a little checking around probably with the sponsor's office and figure out who's opposed and make a judgment.

So follow up. Call them back in a week or two weeks. Call the staffer who was in the meeting with

you, remind him or her, "*I was there on March 4 and you were going to consider cosponsoring mental health parity. What has the Senator decided?*" If there's still not an answer or they say, "gee, we still haven't focused on it," set another time to call them back. Ask if there's any further information you can provide to help in their consideration of the issue.

Explain why it's in the public interest and the legislator's interest to support you. Here you want to explain how people are helped by psychological services. You can go into the mind-body connection or talk about how many visits to primary care physicians are for mental health reasons. The dropoff packet has a terrific handout that you can point to in discussions with new staffers who are unfamiliar with psychology. It's called, "Health Care Reform: Congress Should Ensure That Psychologists' Services Are Key in Primary Care Initiatives."

Know the cost. Be ready to answer the question. Almost all members are worried about the effect of legislative proposals on the federal deficit and many will also ask about what businesses will have to pay if the bill passes.

Be ready to counter the other side's argument. Sometimes when you're presenting a point, the staffer or member says, "That sounds kind of interesting, but these other guys were just in to see me the other day and they said that if we do what you want, the it's going to run up the deficit eight gazillion dollars in each of the next five fiscal years." What do you say to that? You want to be able to parry that accusation and put it in some context. A good lobbyist is going to be able know what the other people are saying about you and that then you can counter their arguments.

Don't be bamboozled by parliamentary jargon. Many of us political science majors have made a decent living by making the legislative process sound much more complicated that it really is. So if you're in this rut in a meeting and the staffer is telling you all about the parliamentary procedure, about the motion to instruct in the budget reconciliation process... and you get the sense that you're getting farther and farther away from what it was that you wanted to talk about, just turn the conversation around. Say, "Mr. Jones, I don't know about all these process details, I'm here to tell you what the effect of this issue is on your constituents who are my patients and why we need to make these changes."

Refocus the discussion on the patient, that's what you're the expert in...mental health and the patients you serve. You as a taxpayer pay the staff and pay the member to sweat the details of how to get done what you want to get done. I'm not saying don't be oblivious to the process but very often people will purposely take you down this road of distraction and talk about process rather than substance.

Admit you don't know the answer. If you're asked a question and it's not covered in your materials or you don't remember the answer, don't fake it. You will get a lot more respect for saying, "I'm not sure on that point, you may be right, I'll get back to you with the answer just as soon as I can." Contact our Government Relations Office and we'll assist you in getting that information and then you can follow up.

Work in coalition with other organizations when possible. Advocacy in the Congress is getting done in large coalitions. Working in a coalition strengthens your efforts and is useful particularly on issues that aren't your most urgent. That way you can spend your time working on your top priority issues and work in coalitions on your other ones. Coalition activity is really a force multiplier it lets you cover more things to keep in touch with what's going on. We work on a regular basis in a mental health coalition with the American Psychiatric Association, Mental Health America and others, and participate in about five other coalitions on various issues.

Be a resource to the office on mental health issues. If you establish a working relationship with the health LA, that person may call you to ask your opinion before something happens. The member thus can draw on

your expertise. Offer him or her the enormous expertise of the field of psychology on societal problems like violence, children's television, whatever the member is interested in.

Praise the staff in your thank you letter. When you praise the staff and you send a letter to the staffer's boss, saying, "Miss Harris was tremendously attentive to our concerns and well represented you. You should be proud to have her on your staff," that member is going to see that letter. And put your soundbite in your follow up letter, "*We were glad to be able to visit with Miss Harris about the need to extend the restoration of psychologist Medicare reimbursement that was cut by CMS.*" You're placing your message in front of the member. Just in case the staffer didn't take the material you left and review it with the member, that letter is going to get through! I'm not saying if the staffer was really obnoxious that you should lie and tell the member that the staffer was great. Use your imagination, at least thank that staffer for her time and say you look forward to the next visit. Send the staffer a copy of the letter that you send to his or her boss.

Give the member visibility/publicity with a speaking invitation or newsletter coverage that circulates in that district or state. This is an important part of followup. It might be as simple as a report that you came to Washington and you met with Senator Jones and shared your concerns about these issues. Extend speaking invitations to your state convention or meetings of local groups. If you gather more than ten people you can often get a member of Congress to come speak. A few more are necessary to get a senator. What you want to do is provide a forum for the representative or senator to come and speak.

Think of what goes on in the congressional office when they accept a speaking invitation. It forces them to react to your agenda. The staff had to run around and say, "Oh my God, the boss is going to speak to this group next weekend. We've got to prepare something for him to say, what are they interested in?" Then the staff calls the Practice Organization and says, "Our boss is going to speak to a mental health conference. What are your current issues?" It might not have been the same staffer that you met with on the Hill, so it gives another opportunity to get in and get the staff to focus on your issues. Then hopefully the member will come and say something that you will like. It may even jog him or her into reviewing your issues and saying, "These bills look pretty good, I'm going to go ahead and cosponsor these bills, so that when I go and speak to this group back home I'll have some good news for them." It's rare that they're going to come in to your meeting without something positive to say. So when they come in with a gift of support, you give them a plaque, take their picture, publish their picture in your newsletter and the circle goes around and around.

Political giving reinforces your message. House members run for reelection every two years – their fundraising never stops. Senators have to raise tens of thousands of dollars every week to have a viable statewide campaign. Candidates who have their hand out usually have their ears open. Your personal contributions directly to the campaigns of members of Congress -- and especially when combined with those of other psychologists through AAP/PLAN, psychology national PAC – amplify your issue message. Political giving reinforces the issue message delivered by grassroots psychologists who write and call and by Practice Organization lobbyists here in DC. So join AAP and contribute to its political action committee.

To conclude, you're seeking to contribute to a multi-year advocacy process by continuing to build on the good efforts of psychology proponents at home and in the nation's capital. I know that the APA staff and governance deeply appreciate your active involvement in Federal advocacy we look forward to working with you in this process.

February 2009